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ABSTRACT

Education must make citizens not only competent to enter the labor market but also to find work that is a rewarding use of an individual's abilities. Racial unrest and unemployment are the products of an inadequate educational system which finds 25 percent of young people denied access to the labor force. The focus of vocational education must shift from a remedial to a preventive approach. Career consciousness should be fostered in the elementary grades accompanied with job-related instruction in the upper elementary grades. In high school, students should be allowed to move in and out of vocational-technical and academic courses, thus undermining the elitist system of tracking students into a terminal degree curriculum. In opposition to a policy which supports a separate approach to education for the disadvantaged, a system which would address itself to the needs of all students (eliminating in the process the stigma attached to vocational courses) is needed. In order to encourage local school districts to supply adequate vocational and technical education opportunities, the Federal government should cover a substantial portion of costs and should provide leadership. Cooperation between schools and manpower training programs and the participation of high school principals are also needed. (KG)

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# COMPETENCE FOR ALL AS THE GOAL FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION*

Address by James E. Allen, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for Education
and
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It is a special pleasure to address the Secondary School Principals of our Nation because of the powerful influence you have on determining the character and the vitality of the education experience of our young people. The development of the secondary schools has been one of the triumphant achievements of American education. That their successful growth is continuing, despite the special vicissitudes of these times, is due in large measure to the capability and determination of the secondary school principals, both as individuals and as a group.

In a magazine article on higher education written last Fall, I dealt with the question: "Why Would Anyone Want to be a College President?" A decade ago, such a question would have been laughable; today it is sharply relevant.

The same question -- and the same answers -- might well be applied in the case of the secondary school principal: why would anyone want to be a principal in these days of controversy and conflict over drugs, sex education, desegregation, student power, teacher strikes, community control and all the rest.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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The answer is twofold: first, education is still one of the most important -- if not the most important -- functions of our society and one of the most satisfying and productive ways of being of service; second, despite current harassments and turbulence, this is a time of tremendous hope for progress toward our educational goals.

For some years now we have been in a period when we have been indulging ourselves in speculation about change in education -- a rather pleasant period in a sense, when it was possible to enjoy the excitement of an atmosphere of newness without plunging into the manifold difficulties, the struggle, of making change a reality in our educational system. Of course, change has taken place, but not even the most optimistic advocate can assert that it has been either of sufficient degree or of the basic nature required.

This period of somnolence is fast ending; first, because of the sheer pressure of the need; second, because of the growing readiness of the profession to accept and promote change; and finally -- and perhaps most significantly -- because of a new tougher attitude toward education that increasingly emphasizes accountability, and refuses to accept promises, demanding performance.

What the future holds, I believe, is a recasting of the entire educational system in the United States, in line with new perspectives on our national purposes. The challenges fall on everyone from the

President and the Congress through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to every part of the vast complex of organizations and activities that make up education in America.

The real opportunity that now exists to change our schools adds excitement and promise to the role of the principal. No other person so directly determines the character and quality of the life of a school -- the day by day activities that shape the learning and mold the destinies of youth. As Alfred North Whitehead said: "The first requisite for educational reform is the school as a unit, with its approved curriculum based on its own needs."

Thus, the school principal is a major factor in determining whether change in education is to be an amorphous, never-never kind of thing, happening somewhere out there, or whether it is to be a present reality in his own school, part of the day by day experience of the students.

I would hope, therefore, that the secondary school principals would be leaders in actively seeking change, open to new ideas and attuned to the necessity for flexibility in all approaches to the provision of educational opportunity.

Flexibility is the keynote to the kind of change coming. Heretofore the changes we have sought have been largely within the existing educational structure. Now we seek a broader interpretation of education

that discards rigid structuring for a freer adaptation to differing needs, timing, and goals -- an interpretation that encompasses the total life and environment of the young.

This concept of change is in line with the basic idea of trying to produce educational opportunity that will indeed serve the individual.

Perhaps the character of the kind of educational opportunity we must seek is best defined by the word competence -- for no matter where we start in analyzing the needs of our times, we are inevitably faced with the fact that competence is the one great necessity, both for the individual and for society.

It was this fact that strongly motivated my decision to propose the Right to Read as a major goal for the Seventies -- a goal that asserts that by the end of the Seventies, no one shall be leaving our schools without having been stimulated to want to read and given the skill to do so to the full limits of his capability. Reading is, of course, important not merely for itself but for what it makes possible. It is certainly the first milestone on the road to competence in almost any kind of work.

The importance of competence is demonstrated in its relationship to all aspects of life and the problems of raising the quality of life for all.

Take, for example, the problems of environmental deterioration that have become such dynamic issues. What is required here?

A population competent to understand the importance of the ecological equation, with all this implies in terms of willingness to spend money, to forego conveniences that have contaminating side effects, and to vote for environmental control measures. It also requires that our educational system provide our society with the trained manpower necessary to restore and maintain a balanced and life sustaining environment.

Or take the problems of poverty that loom so large on our national horizon. Most people agree that welfare is not the long-range answer. What we should seek to provide for those who need aid is not merely money, but the competence and the opportunity to earn money and support themselves. Competence is what they need to help solve their economic problems and their psychological ones as well. The Family Assistance Plan recommended by the President seeks to achieve this objective.

A sense of oneself as a contributor to the vital processes of society is one of the best safeguards against a feeling of alienation. It is the basis of the self esteem, the pride that engenders responsibility and makes good citizens as well as happy people.

It is the renewed awareness of the universality of the basic human and social need for competence that is generating not only increased emphasis today on career education but a whole new concept of its character and its place in the total educational enterprise.

This new concept rests on the belief that no one, whether he leaves school after 12 years, or even earlier, or after twenty years, should leave without the basic education and skill necessary to qualify him for a place in the world of work. Here, I should like to suggest too that we consider the world of work not just in its narrow sense of employment but also in the broad sense of work as the full and satisfying and rewarding use of an individual's abilities.

The first two reports of the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education, issued during the past year, state with great effectiveness and force the case for the school's responsibility for career education. These reports support the widely held conviction that the violence that wracks our cities has its roots in unemployment and unequal opportunity. Those who have no jobs in an affluent society lash out in anger and frustration. Young men and women who cannot qualify for decent jobs distrust the society which reared them.

Racial unrest, violence, and the prevalence of unemployment among the young have their roots in the inadequacies of our educational system. These young people enter the job market without the skills and attitudes employers require. They and millions of others who are underemployed -- inadequately prepared high school graduates as well as dropouts -- are tragic evidence of failure on our part.

Think of it -- approximately a fourth of our young people denied access to the labor force. The waste of money is almost as shocking as the waste of human resources. Yet, instead of concentrating on the problem at its source, we rely more on remedial measures after the damage has been done -- retraining programs for hard-core unemployed, welfare, correctional institutions, etc.

Why has this self-defeating pattern developed? In preparing its reports, the Advisory Council took a hard look at the whole scene. At the heart of the problem they found a national attitude that considers vocational education as education for somebody else's children -- that in the minds of most Americans the really desirable secondary education is that which leads to the traditional four years of college.

The Council urges that a wholly new outlook be introduced, and introduced at the earliest possible point in the educational process. Career consciousness should be fostered in the very youngest children by giving them, in the elementary grades, opportunities to see at close range what the work of a nurse or a farmer or a printer is actually like. Beyond merely stimulating children to think about what they would like to do when they grow up, the schools should make extensive use of exploratory programs in the world of work -- for some pupils, direct job-related instruction in the upper elementary grades.

At the secondary school level, it is recommended that all students should be allowed to move in and out of vocational-technical and academic courses. This would be a real departure from most past practice.

One of the most serious flaws in our educational system has been its ironclad separation of academic and vocational preparation. This has tended to perpetuate the larger social flaw of a kind of hierarchy of occupational classification which has little to do with the actual value of the work performed.

This separation is not only bad labor economics but pedagogically unsound as well. When academic disciplines are taught in terms of their practical applications, formulas can become real to people not ordinarily attuned to abstractions. When practical skills are taught against a background of theoretical knowledge, they too are often the more thoroughly mastered. Furthermore, this sort of approach makes for an open-ended education -- one where a student can change course as his own development and needs may indicate.

But in addition to the damaging pedagogical and economic effects of the separation of academic and vocational education, there are even more deeply harmful psychological and social effects. Such separation tends to foster a kind of elitism, to formalize and accept -- indeed

encourage -- a materialistic classification of "privileged" and "disadvantaged." This serves no one well, making the privileged smug and making the disadvantaged person feel that he is a second class citizen who cannot be expected to make it in the mainstream of American life.

For all its ultimately destructive impact, the separation often masquerades as the really practical way to deal with the fact that people have different interests and abilities, learning styles, and growth patterns. With compensatory and remedial programs to fall back on for those who are not well served by our primarily academically oriented secondary schools, it becomes easier and easier to rationalize a public school system designed to prepare a relatively few people for conventional higher education.

We can no longer afford this kind of pennywise practicality. Divisive forces in our society are all too strong for us to continue to countenance policies which tend to compartmentalize the destinies of different groups among our people. To put the matter plainly, if there is a national policy -- stated or unstated -- in support of a separate approach to education for the disadvantaged, it cannot but be regarded as a kind of de facto segregation that divides affluent and poor, white and non-white.

If we believe that segregation on any such basis is detrimental -- and I do -- we must concentrate on restructuring our system so that it doesn't happen. What we need, for example, is not special programs for the disadvantaged, but programs of education that, while taking into account the special needs of the disadvantaged, are designed for all young people. The language of the Vocational Education Amendments of 1968, which earmark funds for the disadvantaged, should not be allowed to be interpreted as an implication that programs for the disadvantaged must be separate programs.

The educational opportunity we provide should be a mainstream, with all of its parts equally valued and respected, from which each can take the preparation best suited to his particular needs and abilities, carrying not even a subtle suggestion of inferiority for those in a career education program or of superiority for those who are not.

The Advisory Council on Vocational Education recognizes that the short-term costs of really modernizing vocational education are high. Classes are usually smaller in technical areas than in academic disciplines. Equipment is expensive, and job placement is usually more time-consuming than college counseling.

But when the costs and dividends are evaluated, on a broader scale, it is a different story. Educating young people for employment costs

in the long run far less than educating them for college programs most of them will never enter and then trying to reclaim them with remedial programs. It is ironic to note that today the Federal Government spends about $4 in remedial programs for each dollar it invests in the "preventive medicine" of vocational education.

This pattern of spending has not given us an encouraging return for our money. Last year the Federal Government allotted $1.6 billion for recruiting, counseling, education training and job placement activities directed toward the disadvantaged. Yet, as of last October, Labor Department figures indicated that the unemployment rate in poverty neighborhoods showed no over-the-year improvement.

It is suggested that Federal policies relating to vocational education and manpower training should encourage the investment of at least as much money in career preparation as a part of the mainstream of secondary education as is invested in manpower training programs for out-of-school unemployed, and that the efficient way to use the Federal dollar to encourage local school districts to supply adequate vocational and technical education opportunities as career preparation is to pay all or a substantial part of the extra costs involved.

I have spoken at such length about these reports of the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education because I feel that they have

accurately appraised the situation and have suggested practical and hopeful approaches for dealing with this highly important issue in American education.

From the references I have made to these reports, it is clear that their main thrust is the need to shift the emphasis from remedial programs.

Two main lines of action are called for.

The first of these lies at the Federal level where steps should be taken to make the leadership of the Federal Government more effective in shaping and carrying out policies relating to the improvement of vocational education. This is a need that is recognized in HEW as well as in other parts of the Government and will be receiving increased attention.

The second line of action called for lies at the local level where there is urgent need for coordination in planning between the school authorities and those engaged in manpower training programs for the unemployed in order to reduce both the flow of untrained youth and the pool of unemployed. This objective cannot be achieved by a haphazard approach but will require the formation of an appropriate local body specifically charged with the duty of developing a coordinated plan.

This is an area where you, the secondary school principals, can be a telling force. Your opinions carry the weight of knowledge and

experience and your advocacy can be of tremendous help in moving your community to action. Your participation can help to ensure that the coordination will result in the improvement of vocational education opportunities in the schools which is basic in the effort to shift the emphasis from the remedial approach.

The secondary school was once the end of the line in education for most Americans. Now, for more and more of our youth, it is only a milestone along the way. Whether they leave it to go on to other schools or to go directly into the world of work, we want our young people to take from their secondary schools real skills and a sense of direction -- a sense of direction rooted in competence, the ability to function productively and satisfyingly.

This goal is nothing new, really, but a fundamental part of both the American dream and the American reality. America was the first country to make competence the prime source of status rather than letting prestige come from an assigned position in society. People came here from parts of the world where everyone was either a member of the idle and privileged few or one of the lowly and drudging many. They came to shape a society which would honor doers.

Let us revitalize this great tradition by making sure that no American is denied the deep satisfactions of competence, the inner

security that comes with knowing how to do something the rest of the community needs and wants. This is true privilege. This is status. This is the final affluence of the spirit.

To have a part in providing education that achieves such a goal and to be involved in education in a time that holds such promise is, I believe, sufficient and satisfying answer to the question of "Why would anyone want to be a school principal?"